



Air Force Negotiation Center

The Challenge to Retire the A-10: A Negotiations Case Study

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A-10 in Action (U.S. Air Force Image)

Purpose

This case study examines a current and politically charged issue relevant to the daily tasks of the Air Force Legislative Liaison staff. The study hits the highlights of the issue and will help guide your in class discussions. During your class you should not focus on developing or supporting a personal view (pro or con for retiring the A-10), but on applying negotiation theory and conflict resolution concepts as concisely as possible. You may be a subject matter expert on this issue or you may not and it is not your job to be the expert on the issue, but to prepare Air Force senior leaders to engage Congress. The AF’s divestiture of the A-10 is just one of multiple examples of the modern military staff officer’s daily challenges. Your challenges go well beyond the basic strategic concept of “fighting and winning America’s Wars.” They are the heart and soul of the political climate surrounding the Service’s task to organize, train, and equip America’s Air, Space, and Cyberspace forces.

Consider for a moment, the operational environment of our senior leaders as they engage our civilian leadership. Their actions are often defined by the second, third, and higher order effects of our positions and interests. The Air Force can and does establish positions and interests on multiple issues. Developing these positions should be guided by strategic planning and an understanding of the current and future global strategic and operational environments. For example, the initial Air Force plans for the A-10’s retirement appeared to fit into a gap for Close Air Support (CAS) requirements based on the planned and executed withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, but then the fight against ISIS again put the A-10 in the showcase and on the front line. The rise of ISIS as a third order effect potential gave a longer life to this weapon system.

The exercise’s objective is to conduct critical thinking within the context of solving a problem and to develop an understanding of the positions, interests, and other factors

that you must understand to resolve conflicts and to formulate ideas and options for dealing with future and emerging challenges (meaning tough & complex problems).¹

For this exercise, review the critical thinking questions and take a few notes for the guided discussions. Consider the issue, review the information, examine your biases, and conduct analysis. How would you advise and prepare senior Air Force leaders on the best way to successfully engage on this issue? Each of you brings an individual perspective into the discussion. You can also reference the bibliography for more detailed resources or even conduct your own research. Outside reading and research, however, is not required.

Critical Thinking Questions

These questions are not focused on the capabilities or mission of the A-10. The A-10 has incredible baseline capabilities to provide Close Air Support (CAS). It has specific strengths to support a variety of other missions. The A-10 also has limitations based on many factors beyond its ability to conduct the CAS mission. Interestingly many other Air Force aircraft also have significant capabilities and also have significant limitations. The Air Force applies tactical and operational employment options to enhance the strengths and minimize the weakness of all its weapons systems. This case study is not about the tactical or operational employment process, but is about the process of influencing decision makers and creating the best (may we even say common sense) solution to a very challenging and multifaceted problem.

1. What was/is the position of the US Air Force with respect to the retirement of the A-10? Who established this position? How was/is this position different from the DoD guidance?
2. What interests are foundational to these positions?
3. How do we balance long-term and short-term interests in an environment that values short-term (such as the two year election cycle) success over long-term sustainment? How do we accomplish the necessary long-term planning in these processes in an ever changing political and fiscal environment? How do we do the same as special and local interests attempt to influence the process?
4. Who are the actors - political, commercial, and military - that are concerned with the outcome of the A-10 retirement? Is any decision in the near term final or is it just one step in a longer process?

¹ The author sometimes finds it difficult to define the skill of “Critical Thinking.” One helpful tool is to use the classic interrogative questions to formulate thoughts – Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. If you answer these questions during staff work your commanders will greatly appreciate your efforts. A great book to read when considering this subject is *Start with Why* by Simon Sinek.

5. Who is/are the decision maker/makers in this process and how do we best influence them to support our interests? What types of power can be applied by the Air Force?
6. What are the trust levels between the parties involved in the decision making process?
7. What are the Best Alternatives to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) for the parties within this negotiation? Did the AF have to exercise its BATNA in the negotiations on the retirement of the A-10? Does a realistic BATNA exist for any party?

This is just a sample of possible critical thinking questions. The purpose of this case study is not to answer all the questions, but it will help you ask the best questions. During your day-to-day problem solving processes you have to develop your own questions and anticipate the questions of others. Many of these questions will revolve around the interests and relationships of the parties involved in the effort to resolve a conflict or to develop a unified position on an issue. Another aspect of this process is the analysis of power (types and positions) as it exists between parties.

Discussion Questions

Please review these questions and be prepared to discuss this case in detail. You can link to the sources used in the bibliography to read more in-depth information if you desire. You can find the Cooperative Negotiation Strategy Worksheet to help your preparation at http://culture.af.mil/NCE/PDF/cnsworksheets/1_multipage.pdf.

1. How are strategic decisions made? How do senior leaders balance risk vs. gain in the modernization process?
2. What criteria do the Combatant Commanders apply to successful support of specific combat and operational mission sets (such as close air support)? How does the Joint community bring inputs into identifying the capabilities needed to support their war fighting mission?
3. How do the internal Air Force positions and interests differ from the perceived external Air Force positions and interest with respect to the F-35 development cycle?
4. How do current conflicts impact future strategic planning? Did the Air Force over commit to the F-35 during a time when the A-10 was tasked to support lower threat operations in the Middle East and Asia?
5. What are the possibilities of balancing real-time lower threat environment operational capabilities against the requirements for air operations in a high threat environment?

6. What is the best way to specialized tasks – with specialized systems or more generalized systems with multiple special capabilities?
7. How do we balance the diversity of operational environments against the cost of current and future weapons systems? Do our weapons systems need to operate in all threat environments?
8. Why would we not fully return the close support mission to the other Services or other capabilities such as advanced surface-to-surface fires? Why would the Army not take over the care, management, and employment of the A-10 aircraft?
9. What is the mission of the Air Force?

Introduction

“Given the fact the A-10 issue continues to be an emotional topic ... All parties felt it would be best if [Post] continued to serve the Air Force in a different capacity.”

Air Force Public Affairs Statement
J.Q. Public Blog

“Col. John Boyd, pioneer USAF tactician and strategist, believed, ‘to win wars, people come first, ideas second and hardware last.’”

Quoted by Joel Bier, A-10 Weapons Officer
In *The Real Problem with Killing America’s A-10 Warthog*

“Amid some confusion over when the Air Force will retire the A-10 attack plane, top service officials this week clarified the plan to start drawing down Warthog squadrons in fiscal 2018.”

Article by Lara Seligman, Defense News
In *Air Force Clarifies A-10 Retirement Plans*, March 2016

The Secretary of Defense McNamara established the requirement for the A-10 in the 1960s and its design was birthed in the minds of a visionary group of Air Force aircraft advocates and designers. Based on the growing requirement for an attack aircraft to support large-scale conventional European warfare, the AF designed a rugged, low-altitude attack platform with an internal capability (the 30 mm GAU8/A) to kill armored vehicles.² The A-10 hit its initial operational capability in 1977 and currently has some 283 plus aircraft distributed between the active, guard, and reserve forces. The A-10 has never been operationally employed in Europe as first envisioned, but has a validated combat record in operations ranging from Grenada, the Balkans, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, and in the current fights against ISIS.

Operationally the A-10 has shown versatility in employment through direct attack, special operations support, combat search and rescue operations, on-scene commander’s duties, etc. The core mission of the A-10 and its community of supporters remains Close Air Support or CAS. In a 2014 study of Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) and Joint Fires Observers (JFOs) PhD candidates Schneider and MacDonald surveyed and interviewed approximately 500 individuals. This study did not address specific platforms, however, over 100 JTACs and JFOs wrote in endorsements for specific aircraft. 48% of the respondents stated that their preferred aircraft was the A-10. The

² The author was a 25 year Air Force helicopter pilot and greatly respects the lifesaving capability of the A-10, especially in the hands of a skilled Air Force pilot. Some call the aircraft ugly but it is a truly beautiful flying and killing machine (like many of our other systems). The author has attempted to withhold this bias in this case study.

next closest was the AC-130 with 13%. JTACs and JFOs strongly and specifically preferred the A-10 in danger close scenarios. They also strongly stressed the need for aircrew whom were familiar with the CAS mission when in a fight. (Schneider and MacDonald). The data in this study gives a slightly mixed message; JTACs and JFOs say it is not just the A-10 and its capabilities, but the training and “CAS” experience of the employing system’s crew that is critical for supporting troops on the ground.

The A-10 has a strong group of advocates³ and the aircraft (including those who fly, maintain, and employ) has a proven combat record. When you examine this history it is interesting that in 2013 the Air Force quietly planned to retire all its A-10 aircraft from 2015 to 2018. The Air Force’s stated purpose of the retirement was to use the funds and manpower from the A-10 program to support the standup of the F-35. This retirement was initially opposed by thirteen senators and 20 congressmen in letters to the Defense Secretary and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. There were, however, many in Congress who supported a phased retirement of the A-10 and advocated for the F-35. The Air Force’s position did not change. The Air Force also contended that other platforms could and would provide CAS until a fully CAS capable F-35 is available. (Majumdar) This budgetary recommendation set off a debate on the status and employment of the A-10. A debate that has seen senior officers relieved, Congress engaged, and the A-10 committed to another fight in multiple and ongoing deployments to fight ISIS. (Howell)

³ To capture some of the passion and emotion of the A-10 community I recommend the piece by Scott Wolff titled *The A-10 Video Some Didn’t Want You to See* at <https://fightersweep.com/3030/the-a-10-video-some-didnt-want-you-to-see/>. Air Force members have created and sustain cultures associated with specific weapons systems. These cultures are rightly passionate with respect to their systems capabilities (some systems offer broad applications and some are focused). This passion is critical (in the author’s opinion based on 25 years of operational experience) in creating a mission effective weapons system in a high-risk battlespace. The Air Force team wants to do its job to the best of their ability as well as support the grand strategy of the Air Force, the DoD, and our national leadership.

Background



U.S. Air Force Images

Beyond the need for strategic force planning in a fiscally constrained environment, perhaps few would argue about the need to divest the Air Force of the A-10. It has proven itself and with careful management and wise maintenance planning it could be sustained for some time into the future. The challenge comes when fiscal realities and strategic planning clash and senior leaders have to make decisions on future force structure within a constrained budget. These decisions, which flow through the Defense Secretary’s approval process, are normally then validated by the civilian leadership and thus ordered. The A-10 retirement plan emerged out of this process and it was moving forward until the political and operational environments changed.

The Air Force’s actions to divest the A-10 sparked a policy debate. Military staff officers should view these policy decisions within the context of the global environment and future battlespace. In 2012 the US had completed its withdrawal from Iraq and initiated its drawdown in Afghanistan. ISIS had only begun to emerge as a global threat. Force structure programming decisions cannot be made instantaneously but are implemented by the Services over year’s long plans. Add to this the Air Force decision (as directed by Congress and signed by the President) to implement the personnel system force management program to cut end strength and you have a bleak fiscal picture. Tough decisions had to be made to keep future programs such as the F-35 on track and the decisions may have been initially wise, but soon challenged.

The Air Force CAS community reacted to the announcement of the planned retirement. One pilot is quoted as saying “I know that the Air Force was clueless about close air support. But after reading through their answers (author’s comment - pilot is reacting to the AF’s statements on multirole aircraft performing CAS adequately) not only are they clueless, they are completely inept at it. I’m surprised we do as well downrange given these types of responses.” Was the Air Force abandoning the CAS mission? The Air Force response – no. The Air Force’s counter to this argument was that fiscal constraints required it to maintain a multirole aircraft fleet that can do more things than just one or two specific missions. (Majumdar) These arguments continued and the battlespace also began to change both politically in Congress and operationally as the

fight against ISIS expanded.

The Issue

It appears the announced plan to retire the A-10 created a grass-roots movement within the CAS community (Majumdar). The Air Force and other Services contained this movement internally initially, but it did begin to attract attention from Congress. The Air Force created its own controversy in addressing this problem. Following the announcements that the A-10 would be retired, it appeared that some Air Force senior leaders were on the defensive to defend their positions. The Major General Post incident is a strong example of how the Air force did not help itself in the efforts to retire the A-10. In January 2015 Air Combat Command (ACC) hosted the annual Combat Air Forces Tactics Review Board (TRB) and Weapons and Tactics Conference at Nellis AFB. Major General James Post, the ACC Director of Operations, attended and spoke at this conference. On January 10, 2015, MG Post provided opening remarks to the TRB and provided an answer to a question on the status of the A-10. The answer to the question included the word “treason.” (IG report, p. 5)

The March 2015 IG report on the Post statements concluded:

1. He stated words to the effect that if anyone accuses him of saying this, he would deny it, and
2. He stated words to the effect that anyone who is passing information to Congress about A-10 capabilities is committing treason.
(quoted from the IG report, p. 15.)

The IG substantiated that Post’s statements were unlawful (IG report, p.17). It is reported that the Chief of Staff of the Air Force remained silent and did not initiate the investigation into the Post comments until Senator McCain demanded an investigation. Following the investigation noted above, the ACC Commander removed Major General Post from his position in April 2015. (J.Q. Public)⁴ The removal of MG Post was not a final step in any process. It was just one step in a cultural fight within the Air Force.

Following Post’s removal, retired General Rodger Brady wrote a letter to the editor of Air Force Times. Brady made several arguments supporting Air Force senior leaders and the challenges of their decision making processes. Brady, however, clearly stated that military members who “take their opposing views directly to Congress are not whistle-blowers...They are simply insubordinate.”⁵ Brady goes on to call Congress’s efforts to

⁴ Reference <https://www.jgpublicblog.com/air-force-treason-debacle-reveals-deeper-problems/> for more thoughts on this issue. There are several writings that address the culture of senior AF leadership. CSAF called those fighting for sustaining the A-10 “emotional.” The Author fully respects the challenge and positions of the CSAF in working to modernize the Air Force fleet and sustain combat operations. These are difficult times and difficult decisions. Could they have been made in a better way, especially with respect to the public fight that occurred?

⁵ Letter in full at <http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/opinion/2015/05/05/letter-to-the-editor-insubordination-on-a-10/26920719/>

engage on the A-10 issue as troubling. (Brady) This letter added fuel to the A-10 fire. The media and Blogospheres reacted to Brady’s letter. James Weirick, a retired Marine lawyer and Judge Advocate, in *Task and Purpose* was critical of Brady and stepped through the legal challenges of his letter and argument. Like Post, Brady implied that communication with Congress was criminal conduct. Recommending ignoring the Brady letter, Weirick concluded that the Air Force was drawing great attention to the issue of retiring the A-10. (Weirick and POGO)

One more Air Force statement should be addressed in this conundrum. In February 2015 the Air Force released data to the media showing the A-10 had killed more friendly troops and Afghan civilians than any other Air Force aircraft. The USA today published this information in an article that was not positive toward the A-10.⁶ The Program On Government Oversight (POGO) however, quickly disputed these statistics as “cooked” by the Air Force. POGO claimed that the statistics were based on total losses versus a rate of losses against total sorties flown. The Air Force also used two time frames for the data sets making realistic comparisons between aircraft types and missions difficult. POGO claims when these statistics are adjusted for rate and comparable time frames the A-10 is actually the safest aircraft employed in Afghan conflict.⁷ It appeared as if the Air Force was not working to resolve the conflicts over the A-10 as smoothly as possible.

Congress continued to react to this issue based on both the needed changes in aircraft force structure and the political climate being generated by these and other media reports. The General Accounting Office (GAO) (following the initial Air Force request to divest the A-10 and at the request of Congress) conducted a study to examine the impact of divesting the A-10 weapons system. The GAO as an independent agency offered several observations:

- 1) Divesting the A-10 supported the strategic prioritization of transitioning to fifth-generation aircraft in a fiscally constrained environment. The Air Force balanced its alternatives and the DoD “reviewed and approved” the Air Force decision.
- 2) The Air Force overestimated the cost savings created by the A-10 retirement.
- 3) Divesting the A-10 would create a significant gap in the Air Force’s ability to provide CAS. This finding was based on the limited capability of the F-35 to support the CAS mission during transition. It also stated that the Air Force could mitigate the loss of the A-10 by supporting CAS with other aircraft.⁸ (GAO report, p. 2-3)

⁶ Brook, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/05/a-10-john-mccain-iraq-afghanistan/22931683/>

⁷ Smithberger, <http://www.pogo.org/our-work/articles/2015/af-hq-declassified-and-released-incomplete-data.html>

⁸ Mike Pietrucha in *The Myth of High-Threat Close Air Support* at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/06/the-myth-of-high-threat-close-air-support/> provides insight to the argument of the F-35 (or any other aircraft) surviving in a high-threat environment. It is an interesting argument that there really would be no call for CAS in a high-threat environment and that other forms of fire would be more effective in this situation. He also adds to the discussion that the F-15E is a strong CAS platform when employed in that mission.

While not making any recommendations the GAO report clarifies the A-10 retirement issues. The Air Force senior leaders made rational decisions and the impact might be greater than anticipated. These decisions have driven Congress to act independently as the Combatant Commanders continue to request the CAS capabilities of aircraft such as the A-10 in their current combat operations.

In April 2015 the House Armed Services Committee voted to keep the A-10 flying for another year. The amendment proposed by Rep McSally prohibited the Air Force from taking any actions in Fiscal Year 2016 to retire the aircraft. The action was not without debate, and some in Congress defended the F-35 and supported various options for retiring the A-10. In the end and by voice vote the actions by Congress prevented the Air Force from executing its Fiscal Year 2015 planning actions. (Wong) Congress continued to take action to frustrate Air Force plans. A CAS fly off was proposed between the A-10 and the F-35. In August 2015 General Welsh commented, “I think that would be a silly exercise”⁹ when asked at a press conference about the testing. Welsh again stated the Air Force position that multirole aircraft are not a direct replacement for the A-10.¹⁰ He also stated that the Air Force was considering a replacement aircraft for the A-10 in the future. Secretary James at the same press conference stated that “if we had billions more we would love to maintain the A-10.”¹¹

Congress again acted in 2016 on the Air Forces proposals. In April 2016 the House Armed Services Committee prohibited the Air Force from expending any Fiscal Year 2017 funds to retire the A-10. The actions also prohibited the Air Force from taking any action on the A-10 until the results of CAS testing between the A-10 and F-35 were reported to Congress. (Seligman, Apr 16) The Air Force continues, however, to call for the divestment of the A-10, now requesting actions starting in Fiscal Year 2018. Meanwhile the A-10 is deployed and will remain deployed in the near future in combat against ISIS or any other threat that requires its capabilities. (Seligman, Mar 16)

Author’s Comments: The future of the A-10 is far from settled. It will be an issue for the Air Force officers for a minimum of a few years. Presently, there is no clear closure or apparent path towards a resolution of this problem. The Air Force is working the issue. CAS working groups are making honest suggestions. Staffs are writing papers and negotiating. Politicians are overseeing and implementing solutions to support their interests. If it is not the A-10, it will be another issue that will challenge the wisdom of our smartest leaders. How will you support Air Force interests to help tackle these

⁹ Seligman, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/air-space/support/2015/08/24/welsh-f-35-vs--10-testing--silly-exercise/32292147/>

¹⁰ Valerie Insinna at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/show-daily/farnborough/2016/07/11/air-force-a10-warhog-replacement-export/86519518/> discusses the idea of an A-10 replacement aircraft. The Air Force motivation for calling for an A-10 replacement was questioned, but the bigger challenge is proposing a new aircraft acquisition when the Air Force cannot fully fund its current modernization programs. In July 2016 the Air Force FY18 budget submission still begins retirement of the A-10, but retains the A-10 until 2022 as part of the ISIS fight.

¹¹ Seligman. *Silly Exercise*

challenges?

Bibliography

This Bibliography is extensive and the author does not reference all sources in the case study. The A-10 retirement issue is an excellent case study as there are multiple sources (primary and secondary) on the issue. There is no shortage of personal perspective on this issue and these sources and more are worth a second look when studying complex problem solving. dco

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